

President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and his Union for the Republic party (UPR) handily secured a second term in June 2014 against independent runner-up Biram Dah Abeid, the head of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritania).

In an extension of the national agency to combat slavery, established in 2013, a special tribunal to prosecute slavery-related crimes was formed in March 2014. By year's end, the tribunal had yet to prosecute any cases of slavery or enforce criminal laws against it.

In November 2014, amid local and international outcry, police arrested Abeid and at least eight other human rights defenders for staging a peaceful march in southern Mauritania to raise awareness around the issue of slavery and exploitation. The arrests were followed by a severe crackdown on the IRA-Mauritania offices and members. Those arrested remained in detention pending trial at year's end.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

## **Political Rights: 9 / 40 (-2) [Key]**

### **A. Electoral Process: 3 / 12**

Under the 1991 constitution, the president has the power to appoint and dismiss the prime minister and cabinet. A 2006 amendment imposed a limit of two five-year presidential terms.

President Abdel Aziz first came to power through a military coup in 2008. The international community strongly condemned the coup, but at home a majority of lawmakers and mayors expressed support. A coalition of four political parties that supported ousted president Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi formed the National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDU) and refused to participate in the junta-led government.

After winning the presidential election in 2009, Abdel Aziz won a second term in June 2014, with 82 percent of the vote. The FNDU, currently a group of about a dozen opposition groups, boycotted the election, claiming that Abdel Aziz would not engage in meaningful dialogue to resolve governance and electoral issues. Abeid ran as an independent and won only 9 percent of the vote. He challenged the election results at the Constitutional Council, citing cases of misconduct and fraud. The council had not responded to these complaints as of year's end. The international community deemed the election satisfactory. Turnout lagged at 56 percent, which political opposition parties cited as a sign of success in their boycott.

Mauritania's bicameral legislature consists of a newly expanded 147-seat National Assembly, elected by popular vote to five-year terms, and a 56-seat Senate, with 53 members elected by mayors and municipal councils and 3 members chosen by the chamber to represent Mauritania's living abroad. One-third of the Senate is elected on a rotating basis every two years. After repeated delays, Mauritania held a first round of National Assembly and municipal elections in November 2013, and a second round in December. The UPR won 74 seats; along with about a dozen allied parties, the number of seats totaled 108. Most major opposition parties—with the exception of Tawassoul, an Islamist party associated with North Africa's Muslim Brotherhood, which won 16 seats—boycotted the elections, claiming the results were predetermined and the process nontransparent.

Under a 2005 law, party lists for the National Assembly elections must include district-based quotas for female candidates, and 20 percent of all municipal council seats are reserved for women.

## **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16 (–1)**

Political parties are free to operate, but Mauritania's party system is poorly developed, and clan and ethnic loyalties, as well as the military, strongly influence the country's politics. Most opposition parties boycotted the 2014 presidential and 2013 parliamentary elections, citing a system dominated by the president and the UPR—both of which won by large margins. The government continues to reject the party registration of the IRA-Mauritania.

Although Haratin make up 40 percent and Afro-Mauritanians make up 30 percent of the country's population, Bidhan Mauritians occupy most elite government and military positions. According to a November 2014 report by IRA-Mauritania, they held 30 of 35 ministerial, 52 of 54 prefectural, and 12 out of 13 gubernatorial posts.

The most recent legislative and presidential elections were conducted before the completion of the national census, which began in 2011. As a result, Mauritians without a newly issued identity card were unable to vote. Though the government was forced to implement reforms in 2012 in response to protests around extraordinary obstacles faced by the Haratin and Afro-Mauritanians when trying to enroll in the census and register to vote, critics cite ongoing discrimination against minority groups in the electoral process.

## **C. Functioning of Government: 4 / 12 (–1)**

Corruption and fiscal transparency are serious problems, especially in bank loans, fishing license attribution, land distribution, government contracts, and tax payments. In 2014, a collective of opposition parties, civil society groups, and unions denounced a series of contracts that the government negotiated in private, including cases in the boating industry, sugar production, a company for agricultural development, and an electric company. An investigation into the operations of electricity company Somelec found that it installed generators worth 36 million ouguiya (\$125,000) at four senior government officials' homes, including that of President Abdel Aziz. Mauritania ranked 124 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

## **Civil Liberties: 22 / 60 (–1)**

### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 10 / 16**

Despite constitutional guarantees of press freedom, journalists practice self-censorship, and private newspapers face closure for publishing material considered offensive to Islam or threatening to the state. In 2011, the government ended a 51-year monopoly on broadcast media with a call for applications for licenses from private outlets. Defamation was decriminalized in 2011, though fines can still be levied. There were no reports of government restrictions on the internet in 2014, though only about 11 percent of the population has access.

In December 2014, a court in Nouadhibou sentenced Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'Kheir, a 28-year-old independent blogger, to death for apostasy in an expedited judicial process. In an anonymous online article published on the website Aqlame in January, Ould M'Kheir criticized the unequal social order in Mauritania and the prophet Mohammed. Ould M'Kheir has been under arrest since January 2014 and was dismissed by his employer and disowned by friends and family. His lawyers have launched an appeal. After the arrest, President Abdel Aziz promised to "take all necessary measures to defend Islam and its prophet," Islam being "above all, democracy and freedom."

The 1991 constitution declares Mauritania an Islamic republic. Proselytizing by non-Muslims is banned, non-Muslims cannot be citizens, and those who convert from Islam lose their citizenship. In practice, however, non-Muslim communities have not been targeted for persecution. Individuals perceived as anti-Islamic are frequently threatened by leading religious leaders. Academic freedom is largely respected.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12**

The constitution guarantees freedom of assembly. Organizers are required to obtain consent from the authorities for large gatherings, and such permission is often denied. Gatherings of individuals seen as opposed to the government are sometimes subject to surveillance.

The environment for civil society groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Mauritania in 2014 was marked by intimidation. Targeted persecution of human rights organizations and their members increased. In January, for example, a peaceful gathering organized by a coalition of human rights organizations to commemorate the deaths of Afro-Mauritians between 1989 and 1992 was dispersed by police with tear gas.

In November, former presidential candidate Abeid was arrested in Rosso, along with nine fellow human rights defenders, during a peaceful march against slavery in the Senegal River Valley. March participants were met with police brutality and tear gas. In December, the imprisoned activists were given less than 24 hours' notice of their hearing date. They refused to attend the trial without their lawyers. The prosecutor in their case recommended five years in prison for the defendants, the seizure of all IRA-Mauritania assets, and fines amounting to \$1,500. A judge denied provisional release for the detainees. A final verdict was expected in January 2015.

Workers have the legal right to unionize, but unions require approval from the public prosecutor and often face hostility from employers. Although only about a quarter of Mauritians are formally employed, about 90 percent of workers in the industrial and commercial sectors are unionized. Nevertheless, workers are often wrongfully terminated, and organized workers are sometimes subject to pressure to withdraw their union membership or forgo legal processes. The right to strike is limited by notice requirements and bans on certain forms of strike action.

## **F. Rule of Law: 4 / 16**

The government heavily influences the judicial system. Many judicial decisions are based on Sharia (Islamic law), especially in family and civil matters, which discriminates against women. Suspects are routinely held for long periods of pretrial detention, and security forces suspected of human rights abuses operate with impunity. Prison conditions are harsh and torture is prevalent, as is the detainment of children, both as criminals and with an imprisoned relative.

Members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb have carried out a number of attacks in Mauritania in recent years. A 2010 antiterrorism law removed previous restrictions on wiretaps and searches, allowed for individuals under age 18 to be charged (which is illegal under Sharia), and granted immunity to terrorists that inform the authorities of a terrorism plot. President Abdel Aziz is seen as a crucial partner of the United States and Europe in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel region.

Racial and ethnic discrimination persists in all spheres of political and economic life, with discrimination almost exclusively targeting Afro-Mauritanians and the Haratin.

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Mauritania and punishable by death for men. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals generally hide their sexual orientation.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16 (–1)**

Freedom of choice of residence, employment, and education is fully awarded to members of the Bidhan class. However, Mauritanian society is deeply rooted in a caste-based system, where employment and place of residence are inherited through generations. The Haratin and Afro-Mauritanians are often excluded.

Discrimination against women persists. Under Sharia, which is widely applied, a woman's testimony is given only half the weight of a man's. Legal protections regarding property and pay equity for women are rarely respected in practice. Female genital mutilation is illegal but widely practiced. Abortion is legal only when the life of the mother is in danger.

Aminetou Mint El Moctar, a prominent women's and children's rights activist and founder of the Women's Association of Heads of Household, was the subject of a fatwa issued by the extremist group Friends of the Prophet in June 2014. The Islamist extremists called for her death in response to public statements she made in defense of Ould M'Kheir, the blogger charged and sentenced to death for apostasy. When El Moctar reported the danger she and her family members faced, Mauritanian authorities failed to offer protection, and police advised her to resolve the issue on her own.

Mauritania is a source and destination for women, men, and children trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and sexual exploitation.

According to the 2014 Global Slavery Index, Mauritania has the highest occurrence of slavery in the world. Despite a 1981 law banning slavery in Mauritania, an estimated 155,600 black Mauritanians are believed to live in conditions of servitude. The government's official stance is to deny the existence of slavery within its borders. A 2007 law set penalties of 5 to 10 years in prison for all forms of slavery, but the law is hampered by a requirement that victims themselves must file a legal complaint before any prosecution can occur (an NGO cannot represent their case for them). A 2014 report by the UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery noted that information on antislavery conventions is not disseminated in a public forum, limiting people's knowledge of their rights. The national agency to combat slavery is tasked with handling these issues, but the agency lacks independence from executive influence. More than a year into its existence, it has failed to receive or act on any complaints of slavery or slavery-related practices or crimes.

**Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

**[Full Methodology](#)**